

**Opening Statement
Chairman Eliot L. Engel**

House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere

US Policy Toward Latin America in 2009 and Beyond

Wednesday, February 4, 2009

A quorum being present, the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere will come to order.

It is my pleasure to welcome you to today's hearing on US policy toward Latin America in 2009 and beyond – our first Subcommittee hearing in the 111th Congress. In particular, I'd like to extend a warm welcome to my good friend and our new Ranking Member Connie Mack and my gratitude to Dan Burton who remains on the Subcommittee, but is becoming Ranking Member of the Subcommittee on the Middle East.

Barack Obama's election was greeted with excitement throughout the hemisphere. When I traveled to Paraguay, Chile and Peru shortly after the presidential election, there was a real sense of optimism, both among the heads of state and the citizens of these countries. I believe that the goodwill generated by President Obama's election will itself do a great deal to reinvigorate US – Latin American relations.

During his campaign, President Obama said, "My policy toward the Americas will be guided by the simple principle that what's good for the people of the Americas is good for the United States. That means measuring success not just through agreements among governments, but also through the hopes of the child in the favelas of Rio, the security for the policeman in Mexico City, and the answered cries of political prisoners heard from jails in Havana."

This bottom-up and direct-to-the-people approach is precisely what is needed in the Americas right now. With 40% of the region's population – some 209 million people – living in poverty, it is essential that we sharply focus our attention on the social agenda in the Americas.

I would like to briefly outline what I think could be some positive steps taken by the Obama Administration early on to further deepen US – Latin American relations:

First and foremost, I believe that President Obama's participation in April's Summit of the Americas in Trinidad and Tobago would send an extremely positive message to the heads of state from Latin America and the Caribbean.

Second, as Chairman Berman moves forward with foreign aid reform and the Obama Administration prepares its FY 2010 budget, it is essential that we increase funding for the countries in the Western Hemisphere. I would venture to say that no Member of this Subcommittee would disagree with me that we need to significantly increase foreign aid to our neighbors in Latin America and the Caribbean. Quite frankly, budgets show priorities and when foreign aid to the hemisphere lags behind, our allies understand the message that is being sent to them.

Third, cooperation between the US and Brazil significantly expanded during the Bush Administration. This relationship needs to be further deepened under President Obama. The US-Brazil Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on Biofuels is the cornerstone of our bilateral relationship, and represents the start of a program to help countries in the region to develop domestic energy supplies, **but** it is not enough. The US-Brazil MOU already supports some so-called “third countries,” but needs to be expanded to additional countries in Central America and the Caribbean, most of whom are more than 90% dependent on imported oil, predominantly from Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. President Obama has spoken of establishing an Energy Partnership for the Americas – something I strongly support. As the House sponsor of the Western Hemisphere Energy Compact Act in the 110th Congress along with Senator Richard Lugar, I look forward to working with President Obama on a hemispheric energy partnership.

Fourth, we must continue to support our friends in Mexico through the Merida Initiative. This is very important, but we also need a more holistic counterdrug strategy that includes greater assistance to Central America and an expansion of the Merida Initiative to the nations of the Caribbean. At the same time, it is critical to get our own house in order. This means reducing the demand for drugs in the US by putting more money into domestic prevention and treatment programs. It also means stemming the flow of firearms into Mexico. Shockingly, 90% of the guns that are used in drug-related violence in Mexico originate in the US. I will soon be sending a letter to President Obama urging him to return to enforcement of the ban on imported assault weapons that was previously enforced by Presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton, but not enforced by the most recent Bush Administration. Returning to enforcement of this ban would help reduce violence in the US and would also curb violence in Mexico by limiting the number of assault weapons flowing from the US into Mexico.

Fifth, I would urge President Obama to focus on Ecuador and Paraguay. It may seem odd that I mention these two small countries. But, I believe they are both countries where increased engagement by the Obama Administration could go a long way. Presidents Correa and Lugo are both looking for ways to work with the US. In Ecuador, I believe the Bush Administration made a mistake in just reaching out to President Uribe – someone who I greatly respect and admire – but not President Correa after the March 1st Ecuador-Colombia border crisis. In the coming years, we must do more to support Ecuador’s efforts to combat the FARC and help refugees at the country’s northern border.

In Paraguay, President Lugo is the first president to be elected not from the Colorado party in 60 years. President Lugo showed his interest in a strong relationship with the US by visiting President Bush in Washington in October. Lugo easily could have waited for a new Administration to take office, but he wanted to demonstrate right away the value he places in a good relationship with the United States. I hope to introduce legislation later this year that would add Paraguay as an Andean Trade Preference Act (ATPA) beneficiary country.

Sixth, we must continue to support disaster recovery efforts in Haiti. At the same time, it is essential to help Haiti prepare for the next disaster. Haiti is the poorest country in the hemisphere, and the need there could not be greater.

I would, of course, be remiss not to mention two countries of paramount importance to this Subcommittee: Colombia and Cuba. In the case of Colombia, I believe that it is important for the new Administration to continue to cultivate our strong relationship with President Uribe, who has been instrumental in reducing kidnappings and homicides in his country. And, of course, we will want to talk more about Cuba today, since Cuba policy is at the forefront of any discussion on US policy toward Latin America.

Finally, I want to bring everyone's attention to this weekend's heinous attack on a synagogue in Caracas. The attack is clearly the result of a climate of fear and intimidation inspired by the Venezuelan government. On Monday, I sent a letter, along with 19 of my colleagues, to President Chavez urging him to end the bullying and harassment of the Jewish community in Venezuela and to extend the community the robust protection it deserves in light of the threats it faces. The Venezuelan government **must** quickly change its tune with regard to the country's Jewish community.

I am now pleased to introduce our distinguished witnesses. Your testimony today will be crucial as we shape the agenda for the Subcommittee in the coming Congress. Sergio Bendixen is president of Bendixen and Associates and a leading pollster in the US and Latin America. Cynthia McClintock is a professor of political science and director of the Latin American and Hemispheric Studies Program at George Washington University. Next, Eric Farnsworth is the Vice President of the Council for the Americas. And, last but not least, Ray Walser is a senior policy analyst for Latin America at the Heritage Foundation.

Thank you very much. I am now pleased to call on Ranking Member Mack for his opening statement.